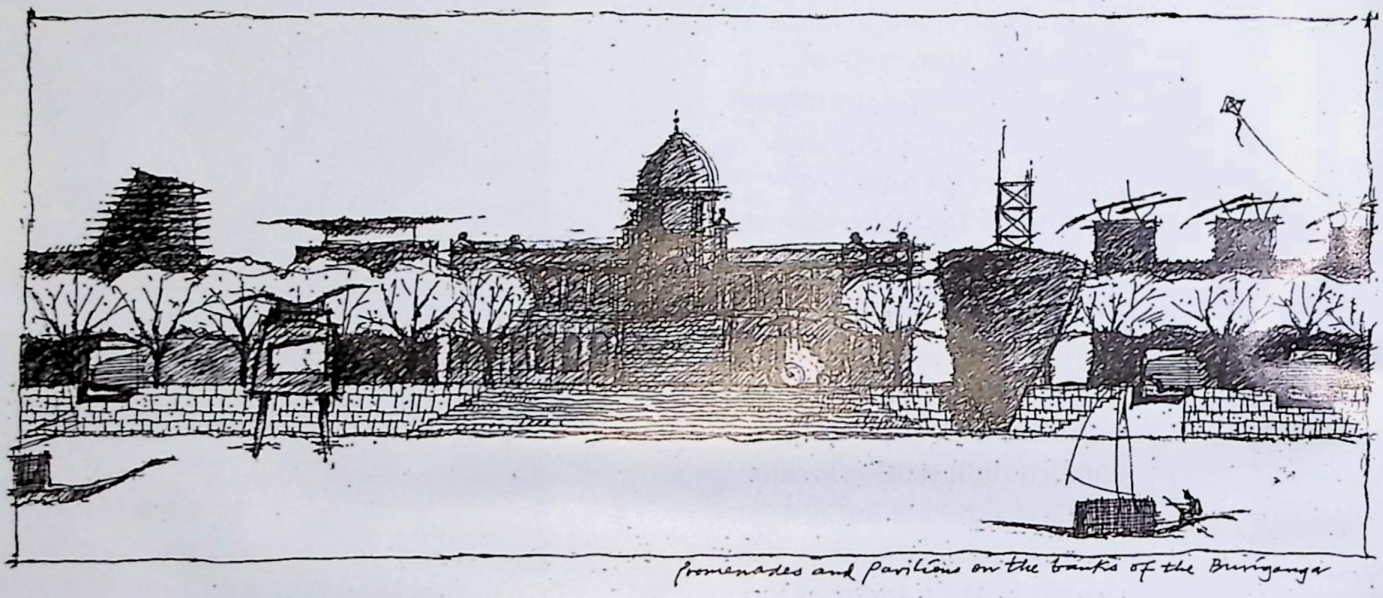
Dhaka: A postcard from New Orleans

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf paints a stunning portrait of how Dhaka can grow within its natural environs and provides a blueprint for what a Dhaka of the 21st century could look like



Promenades and pavilions on the banks of the Buriganga

FOLLOWING the catastrophe wrought by Katrina last year many news commentaries in the US made Dhaka a cousin of New Orleans. The commentators wondered how a city like Dhaka gets pounded by flood year after year and still rebounds smoothly, while New Orleans sinks to the depth of disaster.

Major studies and conferences sought answers to both, the origins of the disaster and ways of redemption for New Orleans. One consensus emerged that what was perceived to be the solution in fact compounded the problem. The levees and the embankments that were constructed for the protection of the city might have had a long-term adverse effect on the regional landscape. The wetlands and flood plains that characterized the landscape of New Orleans had increasingly been depleted, increasing the fury of Katrina.

At the same time, the simultaneous subsidence of land under the city and the rise of the silted river bed made the levee project increasingly futile. Dhaka could ultimately face the same fate of New Orleans. The critical issue for New Orleans, as well as for Dhaka, is how to create a city in the flood-plains.

This article summarizes the results of an exercise I conducted with my architectural class this year, to envision a long-term solution to Dhaka's age-old problems of flooding and over-crowding, taking into account the city's landscape and surroundings, as well as the geo-physical and demographic realities.

All this "vision-making" was, of course, based on trying to understand the features of an intractable city. I have written elsewhere that Dhaka has five distinctive morphologies, or urban spatial patterns, with each pattern being the locus of a certain economic and social activity.

There is first the pattern of the so-called old city, the seemingly chaotic and clustered mass of irregular buildings and spaces tumbling upon each other but, historically, harbouring a strong sense of community.

Second, there is the model of the isolated bungalow on its wide spacious lawn, that characterized the official buildings and residences of the British, that projected a quality of airiness and greenness.